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2016-02-10

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Lehtonen , A , Kaasinen , M P , Karjalainen-Väkevä , M P & Toivanen , T M 2016 , '  
Promoting creativity in teaching drama ' , Procedia : Social and Behavioral Sciences , vol.  
217 , pp. 558-566 . <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2016.02.046>

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/216727>

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2016.02.046>

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Future Academy®'s Multidisciplinary Conference

## Promoting creativity in teaching drama

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### Abstract

The use of drama in education can be seen as an alternative to traditional teacher-led, scripted schooling and an answer to the challenges of our current postmodern knowledge culture, which aims at deeper conceptual understanding by preparing students to be more creative and create multimodal knowledge. At the same time the research project “Challenge of the empty space”, at Helsinki University's Teacher Education Department, has established that the potential complexity and diversity of creative processes in drama education is a challenge for teachers and as well for Finnish teacher education. In this article we bring together three doctoral studies of teaching drama (Kaasinen, Karjalainen-Väkevä and Lehtonen). They present three different approaches for how a teacher could support students' creativity in a drama class. We suggest, that it might be beneficial for teachers teaching drama to have training in improvisation, to pay attention to the holistic presence and to focus on students' perspectives, agency and ownership in teaching.

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Peer-review under responsibility of Future Academy® Cognitive Trading

**Keywords:** creativity; drama teaching; improvisation; sensitivity, pupil's agency

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### 1. Background

Teaching drama is a current issue in the new 2016 National Curriculum. In the Finnish comprehensive school system drama teaching (classroom drama) means the use of forms of participatory theatre for educational purposes. In Finland classroom drama has been mainly connected with literature and interaction skills teaching in Finnish language. In the National Curriculum drama has been put forward as a teaching method for many other subjects. The new curriculum underlines interaction, collaboration and students' active role in learning

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(The Finnish National Board of Education 2015; Toivanen 2012). In drama classes, teachers work with students using games, drama strategies (freeze-frames, teacher in role etc.) and theatre based rehearsals to devise short pieces of fictional situations. In drama fictional roles, time and space help the pupils to communicate their understanding in an aesthetic way to themselves and their fellow participants (Rasmussen 2010; Neelands & Goode 2000; Neelands 2009).

In one of the previous studies (Toivanen, Antikainen & Ruismäki 2012) the research project “Challenge of the empty space”, at Helsinki University’s teacher education department, the teaching factors, which determine the success or failure of drama lessons, were identified and explained. The findings were based on both quantitative (30) and qualitative (N=6) surveys of class teachers (1 – 6 grades) teaching classroom drama. The main reasons teachers named for the failure of drama lessons were due the teacher’s actions, e.g., being too strict, planning, a lack of pedagogical courage to improvise, failure in classroom management and a lack of presence in educational situations. The other reasons for failures were group structural factors (the students engagement, atmosphere, norms and group size) and external factors (small classroom space, lack of time). The most important variables involved the teacher’s actions. The results indicate that teachers should acquire the capacity to understand the creative nature of drama teaching in order to use drama more effectively.

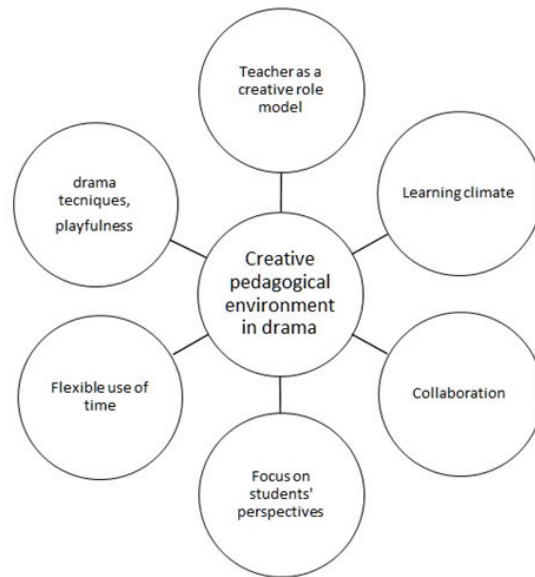
## 2. Creative teaching

Lin (2011) refers to creative teaching as a creative, innovative and imaginative approach to teaching (cf. e.g. Craft 2005). Creative pedagogy includes creative teaching, teaching for creativity and creative learning (Lin 2011). Sawyer (2004, 2006) emphasizes the creative teacher’s ability to use improvisational elements intuitively. When teaching creatively, a teacher should utilize the rules of improvisation by living in the moment and acting spontaneously.

While a teacher may have planned a drama lesson in a certain manner, a creative teacher has the courage to take ideas that have been put forward by the pupils during the lesson and change the lesson to finish in another way (Sawyer, 2004, 2006). Creative teaching is an improvisational performance where there is tension between structure (goals, content knowledge, emotional support, classroom management) and freedom (ability to react to student group reactions). In teaching the balance shifts toward a greater degree of structure and a lesser degree of improvisation (Sawyer 2011).

Another important factor, which supports pupils’ creativity, is a positive learning climate of the classroom, this is closely connected to the nature of the interactive relationships between teachers and learners. It is also especially important that pedagogical solutions focus on students’ perspectives in the classroom. Research shows that environments that encourage students to be active, independent, and express their ideas and opinions also support creativity (Craft et al. 2014; Menter 2010; Fairweather & Cramond 2010).

According to a study by Toivanen, Salomaa & Halkilahti (2016) a creative learning environment for drama consists of the following six different elements: 1) teacher as a role model, 2) learning climate, 3) collaborative learning, 4) student-centered learning, 5) flexible use of time, 6) playful action in drama. (Figure 1)



**Figure 1.** Creative learning environment of drama (Toivanen, Salomaa & Halkilahti 2015)

In Figure 1, the creative pedagogical environment is divided into six different elements. One of the best ways teachers can support and encourage students to think and act creatively is to model creative behavior themselves. Playfulness, in fact, is also one of the characteristics of creative pedagogical environments. Another important factor is the learning climate of the classroom, which is closely connected to the nature of the relationships between teachers and learners. It is vital for optimal creative learning that everyone feels comfortable and safe in the classroom. Additionally, when there should be mutual respect between teachers and students, collaboration is also an important factor for supporting children's creativity in a natural way of working.

### 3. Aim/purpose of the article

In this article we look at creative teaching within the framework of teacher education. We concentrate on creative teaching in drama from both the teacher's and learner's perspectives. We reflect on how a teacher could increase creativity in teaching and support students' creativity. In addition we ask: What are the critical aspects and prerequisites of creativity in the drama class? We approach creative teaching from three different perspectives of creative teaching: improvisation, collaborative student-centered learning and presence in teaching.

There is a similarity between our perspectives and aspects of creative pedagogy described by Lin (2011). The basic idea of our article is that teachers can support and encourage students to think and act creatively in classroom drama lessons by being models of creative behavior, which means improvising, being present and focusing on students' perspectives. By acting creatively teachers create a creative learning atmosphere.

We bring together three doctoral studies of teaching drama due to Kaasinen, Karjalainen-Väkevä and Lehtonen, which propose three different ways a teacher could increase creativity in the drama class. We begin with the perspective of improvisation by Mirja Karjalainen-Väkevä and discover why and how improvisation is needed for creative teaching and student-centered procedures. Miia Kaasinen looks at creativity within the framework of interaction, teacher's sensitivity and presence. Being present and reflective enables connected and transformative teaching and the nurturing of a class's creative potential. The teacher should pay attention to the needs of the students and adjust the learning process to meet them. Anna Lehtonen points out that the concepts of agency and ownership are crucial for critical reflection of students' participation in drama. Later we reflect on the challenges of creative teaching and giving space for student ownership. In the conclusions we present a

model for the creative learning environment of drama, where the different approaches are brought together to illustrate the connections between the different dimensions of creative teaching in drama.

#### **4. The drama teacher as an improviser**

Teaching drama is highly improvisatory, this contrasts with the fact that teacher usually put much effort into planning learning environments. “The challenge facing every teacher and every school is to find the balance of creativity and structure that will optimize student learning. Great teaching involves many structuring elements, and at the same time requires improvisational brilliance.” (Sawyer 2011, 2). When teaching, drama teachers have to take several factors into account, and change their plans if needed. Sometimes, the input from students give the teacher a chance to teach something that was not planned, but is current for the students. In these situations drama teachers should be able to react to the student’s inputs, and construct the learning environment accordingly to promote student learning. Learning improvising can help drama teachers to react better to student input and therefore enable personal and collaborative learning paths.

By accepting that teaching is improvisational, we can develop the abilities of teachers to be flexible and constructive when teaching. Applying conventions of improvisation can help teachers develop their improvising skills in teaching (Sawyer, 2006; Sawyer, 2014). In Lobman’s (Lobman, 2005) research, early childhood teachers reported that an improvisation workshop had improved their interaction with their pupils. The teachers felt more confident using their creativity, taking risks, and listening and accepting their pupil’s ideas. Lobman focused on “yes-and”- rehearsals that aim to produce, accepting and continuing ideas, but also other improvisation concepts—linked to accepting ideas—could promote teachers’ actions during teaching.

Improvisation is rarely free—although it is not planned beforehand—but it is creative combination of cultural conventions. Improvisation in the theatre has specific aims, terms, and concepts. Improvisers are also taught how to gain these aims. Applying the suitable conventions of improvisation will help drama teachers reflect on their actions and how to develop improvisation and thereby teaching skills (Dezutter, 2011; Lobman, 2006). When we outline teaching improvisational, we must define the improvisation concepts that serve the improvisational part of teaching.

The following concepts are discussed frequently in the theatre improvisation literature: spontaneity, presence, accepting ideas, tolerating mistakes, group mind, and shared cultural conventions. These are the key elements, which enable successful collaborative improvisation (Frost & Yarrow, 1990; Halpern, Close, & Johnson, 1994; Johnstone, 2012; Johnstone, 2014; Salinsky & Frances-White, 2008; Spolin, 1999). These concepts of improvisation can be used as a basis for building on teachers’ improvising skills. However, we still need concepts and terms that are especially relevant to teaching. Drama teachers have to be ready to throw themselves into creative processes, where the result is unpredictable. To be able to do this, the improvisation basics—such as being spontaneous, being present, accepting, tolerating mistakes, and heading towards a group mind using shared cultural conventions—can help drama teachers.

#### **5. Teacher’s presence and sensitivity in drama (teaching)**

As drama teachers aim to give and create space and time for pupils’ ideas and creative solutions in drama teaching, the teachers need to have a capacity for rapid decision-making, group management skills, tolerance of incompleteness and the ability to create a positive learning atmosphere (Toivanen 2013; Toivanen, Halkilahti & Ruismäki 2013). To be able to take account of students’ perspectives in effective and intuitive decision-making processes, teachers need to be holistically present. Being present means giving up the normal social roles, but concentrating totally on and participating in the interaction of drama class. This requires transformation of teacher’s role and taking part in the aesthetic transformation of drama (Juncker 2015). When the students realize that their teacher is present, listening and reacting to their initiatives, a positive atmosphere of mutual trust is promoted.

Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) have extensively studied theories and research related to ‘presence in teaching’. They define the teacher’s presence as “a state of alert awareness, receptivity and connectedness to the mental, emotional and physical workings of both the individual and the group in the context of their learning

environments and the ability to respond with a considered and compassionate best next step” (Rodgers & Raider-Roth 2006, 266). They talk about “reflective teaching” and “connected teaching” and note that this kind of teaching cannot be reduced to a series of behaviors and skills, as such a presence also involves self-knowledge, trust, relationship, compassion, empathy and authenticity (Rodgers & Raider-Roth 2006, 266, 274–275).

The reflective and connected teaching of Rodgers & Raider-Roth (2006) well describes the interaction that a drama teacher should strive for. Student-centered learning requires that a teacher should have a holistic presence and sensitivity to recognize their learners’ messages. From the learners’ point of view teachers should be present and respond skillfully to their needs, strengths and experiences. It is all about having a feeling of being secure and being able to take risks. When the participants have this feeling drama lessons are opportunities for the learners to discover themselves by trying something new as a part of the group. (Rodgers & Raider-Roth 2006; Toivanen 2002; Toivanen, Malkamäki, Ilvonen & Ruismäki 2015.)

To be able to respond to their learners’ needs, drama teachers should be aware of them. In an interaction event both sides want to know if the other can hear what they have to say or if their opinions and ideas are accepted. So both the teacher and the learners, observe each other to see how their expressions and actions are received. If the interaction in the teaching-studying-learning situation is mutual, the learners will feel comfortable to ask for help and share their ideas. And if the teacher is sensitive enough, the learners do not need to repeatedly seek the teacher’s help or approval because their problems were addressed the first time they were raised (Pianta, Paro & Hamre 2008; Rodgers & Raider-Roth 2006).

In drama the development of the “feeling of security” is a big part of the process. The teacher’s presence/sensitivity promotes trust among the students. Students need to have the feeling that they can trust the group and their teacher. Feelings of security and belonging to a group affect students’ self-confidence and thereby also their abilities to learn and support others (Heikkinen 2005; Rodgers & Raider-Roth 2006; Toivanen 2002). Teachers need to be aware of their pupils’ needs, moods, interests, and capabilities, and allows this awareness to guide the way they behave with their pupils (Pianta et al. 2008; Rodgers & Raider-Roth 2006).

In the drama class the teacher is not only a responsible leader but also a guiding co-learner. The teacher needs to be ready to become part of the group, to work and learn alongside the learners (Heikkinen 2005; McLauchlana & Wintersa 2014; Toivanen, Rantala & Ruismäki 2009). Drama teaching is an opportunity for the teacher to create a personal relationship with the learners and break down the traditional space between teacher and pupils (Toivanen et al. 2009). However the teacher’s role as the leader of the class and the drama work is important. Learners should be aware of the rules and there should be a trusting atmosphere in the classroom. The teacher might need to keep the activity manageable and goal oriented, if the students are not ready to take responsibility for and control of their actions.

## **6. Students’ agency and ownership as critical aspects of the student perspective**

Collaborative learning in drama class develops accountable dispositions between the students. When students recognize that their voices and opinions matter, they become an integral part of the dramatic process rather than actors on stages solely designed according to the teacher/director’s interests (Swick 1999,74). Creative collaboration and student-centered learning requires that teachers should have special pedagogical attitudes, as the distribution of the power of the director/teacher depends on a mutual respect in the group consisting of the students and the teacher and a commitment to the process of dialogic and social meaning making (Neelands 2009, 183).

In the student-centered learning process the teacher has to adjust to the students’ learning process and maintain a transformative leadership (Österlind 2011; Lehtonen 2013; Lehtonen 2015). Drama work requires teachers at least to momentarily give up control and give power to the group, otherwise there would be no creative collaboration in the drama class. This requires the teacher to have the ability to manage unrest, uncertainty and unpredictable situations and tolerate ambiguity (Toivanen et al. 2009).

Why do some teachers express reluctance towards student-centered learning and neglect students’ ownership of their drama work? According to the research of Swick (1999) drama teachers as creative persons might want

to fulfill their own artistic expression. In order to realize productive student ownership when teachers create a student-centered environment, they must value their pupils' contributions to the lesson more than their own. In addition liberating the creativity of the whole class might result in chaos rather than productivity if the class is not carefully managed. It might be frightening or frustrating for the teachers to attempt to take into account every idea each pupil proposes within the dramatic process. While each opinion matters, the reality is that it is not possible to use them all. Consequently, for the sake of class control, clarity, and time management teachers prefer to have stronger leadership and give up student-centered approaches (Swick 1999, 75-76). In addition some students often test their ownership of drama work by resisting, which might not be easy for the teacher or the rest of the class to bear (Lehtonen 2015).

When critically reflecting on and looking at drama class from the students' perspective, it is worth examining the concepts of agency and ownership. What kinds of students' agency does the learning situation promote and does it enable the development of student ownership? (Lehtonen, 2015). Agency means an individual's or a group's feeling that they are participating in a collective action and making a difference, i.e., that things are not just happening to them (Kumpulainen, Krokfors, Lipponen, Tissari, Hilppö & Rajala, 2010). Active agency can be classified as either positive: making initiatives or supporting collective creation or negative: resisting or deconstructive (Rainio 2008). In drama work it is possible to turn negative resisting agency into a positive force (Rainio 2008). For example resistance can be used as tension in creating drama and resisting attitudes towards drama work can be noted as expressions of emotional investment and engagement (Rainio 2008; Lehtonen 2015).

The concept of ownership illustrates how the experiences of learning drama become personally meaningful. Ownership revolves around critical questions of collaboration, which are ideas that are included in drama work, such as: Who has the power to influence the creative collaboration? When a child is personally accountable for an aspect of the drama action, it leads to the individual taking responsibility. When a teacher gives young people a chance to invest personally and connect with the drama work, it helps students to gain a sense of empowerment and control of their abilities to make practical choices on their own (Swick 1999). When students exert ownership in their work in the drama classroom, their perceptions count and they are the ones who hold the answers (Swick 1999,78). Then the teacher can lean on the group's capacity to collaborate and solve the evolving problems together (Lehtonen 2013). This demands patience and time both on the parts of the teacher and the participants to listen to the different voices and negotiate. Unfortunately, this is not often possible in our typical hectic school life.

Development of ownership is often a time-consuming process especially, if the students are not used to student-centered learning, the teacher needs to adjust to the learning process of the group. Having an understanding of group dynamics and the challenges of empty spaces might help teachers handle the situations and the creative dynamics of collaboration. Building mutual trust is essential for successful student-centered learning. Mutual trust makes it possible for teachers and students to explore the benefits of ownership. When mutual trust is achieved, then the teacher can trust that the class will work toward the proposed objective, and the students can trust that their concerns and ideas will be respected (O'Toole 1999, 103).

## **7. Concluding remarks**

In this article we have reflected on how it is possible to increase and support creativity in drama class. We have approached creativity from three viewpoints: improvisation, presence and students' perspectives. We suggest that to improve the practice of creative teaching in drama it might be beneficial for teachers to consider the following.

First as creative teaching in drama is improvisatory, drama teachers have to be ready to throw themselves into creative processes where the results are unpredictable. To be able to do this, the improvisation basics—such as being spontaneous, being present, accepting, tolerating mistakes, and heading towards a group mind using shared cultural conventions—can help drama teachers.

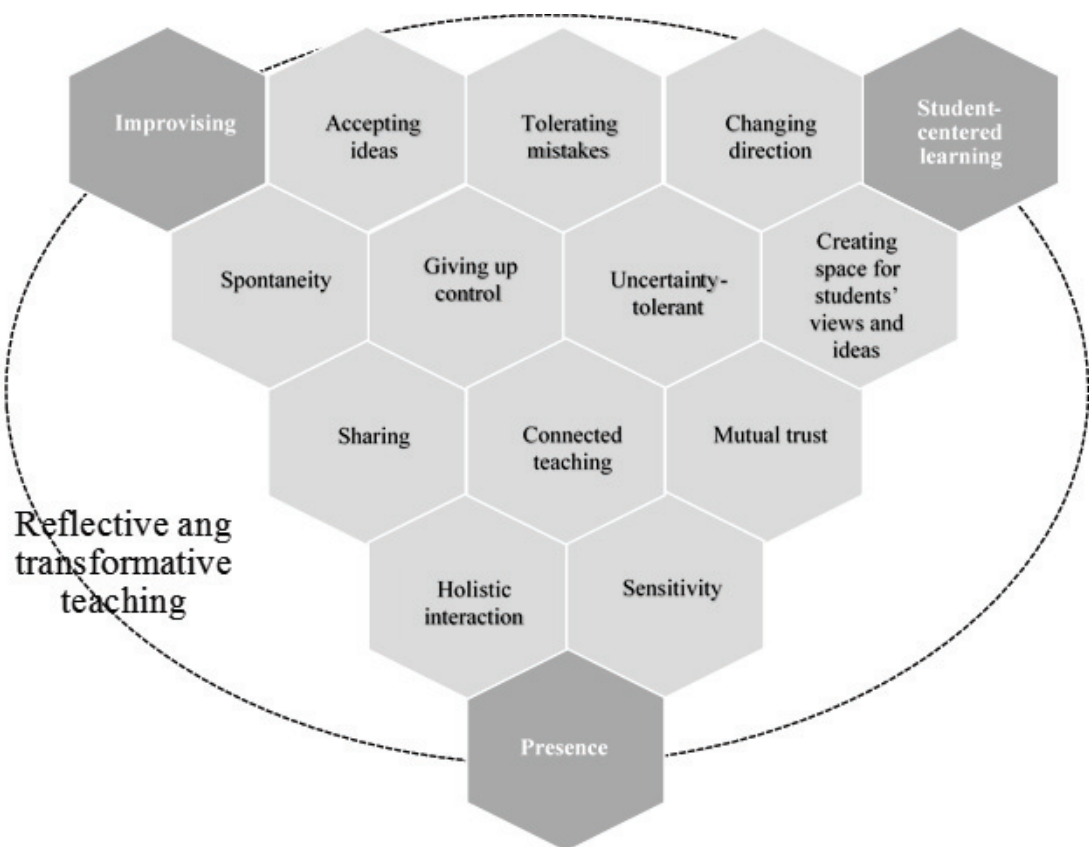
Second as the drama teachers aim to give and create space and time for pupils' ideas and creative solutions in drama teaching, they need to have a capacity for rapid decision-making, group management skills, a tolerance of



incompleteness and the ability to create a positive learning atmosphere. In order to be able to take account of students' perspectives in effective and intuitive decision-making in drama the teacher needs to be holistically present.

The third good practice of creative collaboration involves continuous critical reflection and awareness of students' agency and development of ownership. When promoting creativity it is important when planning to leave space for students' creation processes and incorporate levels where the students will be actively involved in the design.

It might be appropriate for drama teachers to see themselves as guiding co-learner and thus become part of the group, working and learning along with the learners (Heikkinen 2005; McLauchlan & Winters 2014; Toivanen et al. 2009). Teachers could take the role of joint investigator with the students investigating good practice of creative collaboration in drama. However the teacher's role as a leader of the class and promoting/ensuring trust in drama work is important. By building mutual trust, teacher and students can lean on the group's capacity to collaborate and solve the evolving problems together and hence maximize students' creative potential and the social learning potential of drama work (Lehtonen 2013).



**Figure 2.** Aspects of creative teaching in the drama class



In the model, “Aspects of creative teaching in the drama class” we have put together the elements of creative teaching, which have evolved from aspects of three approaches. These are the elements, which should be taken into consideration, when aiming to improve practices of creative teaching in drama.

We recommend that this model and teaching drama should be approached as a game, which teachers could participate in with an orientation of serious playfulness. The elements can be used as pieces of the game and game participants need to consider what they have in their hands and what to focus on. If they hold and play with all the pieces simultaneously, they probably will not be able to manage the game and they will lose. We encourage them to participate in the creative game of teaching drama to take risks, throw themselves into the process, critically reflect afterwards and develop their own ways to teach drama creatively.

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